



Community, objects, and 'boundary workers': Service learning through an activity theory lens

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Summary

This paper draws on activity theory to understand service learning as 'boundary work.' Through this lens, the unit of analysis shifts from the service-learning course to the university-community boundary, and learning and knowledge are viewed as fundamentally social.

Drawing on situated learning, post-Vygotskian theory, and activity theory in particular (Engeström 1996), I define service-learning as complex 'artefact-mediated interacting activity systems.' I then use this framework to analyze two service-learning courses at the University of Cape Town as part of a PhD study (2008) using qualitative thematic analysis. This framework enables researchers to map service-

learning practices as they occur in the field, providing detailed insight into the complexity of the practice. In particular, it makes visible:

Expanded community: Service-learning involves an expanded, more diverse community than traditionally in higher education. Off-campus communities represent different ways of engaging in the world, have different histories with specific tools of mediation, and different ways of knowing, all of which can challenge the university activity system, including in terms of roles, power relations, and rules of engagement.

Dual but interrelated object: Activity theory posits the possibility of a ‘contested object’ across two interacting activity systems. Service-learning partnerships are inherently about both student learning and community service. Due to different motives, this inherent tension in service-learning can impact the outcomes of the partnership overall, challenging notions of what counts as ‘success.’

Role of academics as ‘boundary workers’: The role of academics as ‘brokers’ (Wenger 1998) or ‘boundary workers’ traversing a complex boundary zone highlights many of the challenges and contradictions of service-learning. It challenges the notion that disciplinary-based knowledge is appropriate or suitable for mediating service-learning relationships (McMillan 2011a; 2011b). Following Holland et al (1998) I argue that both identity and agency – including of academics - ‘are lived in and through activity’ (1998, p. 5); in order to understand both, we need to focus on ‘the development of identities and agency specific to practices and activities situated in historically contingent, socially enacted, culturally constructed “worlds”’ (Holland et al., 1998, p. 7).

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